

the television.

As Juanita called out, "Clete. Clete, where the hell are you?" Ginger woke and stood on his chest and stretched. One of her paws dug into his dead right side, the other into the living flesh on the left. Clete gasped and swallowed and tried to call out to Juanita again.

## TELEPATHY

When they moved Clete out of intensive care (his vital signs were good; no reason to stay there), his friends came and gathered around his hospital bed. He gazed up silently at their scared, ashen faces wanting to tell them they all looked like shit, that they ought to go and leave him alone and go on out and get laid or drunk or something.

He was tired and small talk and chit-chat were beyond him.

The men squeezed his good hand and said, "Take 'er easy, man."

The women kissed his forehead and left salty teardrops soaking into his hospital gown.

He closed his eyes and breathed a deep sigh. When he opened them, his friends were gone. They were walking across the hospital parking lot, on their ways to take his telepathic suggestion.

His wife Juanita remained with him. When she lay down at his side on top of the covers, then he was able to get some sleep.

## TANGERINE

The doctor said, "He may come back; his paralysis may be temporary." He had the results of two tests. One was a CAT scan: dozens of pictures of the inside of Clete's skull that revealed an area of brain damage on the left hemisphere. The other test was an angiogram — dye pumped into the cerebral vascular system — showing nothing, and that was good: no more aneurysms on the verge of going boom.

"I've seen guys come back from worse," said the doctor as he held up a picture of Clete's brain. "The damage is not that extensive." He pointed at the dark spot with his



pen. "The size of a golf ball," tapping the picture.  
"Or perhaps a tangerine."

Clete sat silently in his wheelchair. Juanita's lower lip trembled. Clete looked at the doctor. The last word the man had uttered flipped on a light switch in Clete's brain: he saw a pulpy orange ball that began sectioning magically. The first wedge floated up away from its source, then another broke off, squirting some of its sweet/acidic juice in a sparkling burst. Clete could almost taste it. "Tangerine," he said.

Juanita jumped in her chair and grabbed the arm rests and looked wide-eyed at her husband.

The doctor knocked Clete's folder off his desk and leaned up out of his chair and said, "That's it, isn't it? That's his first word."

#### JUST SQUEEZE ME

Ginger had taken to sleeping on Clete's chest on a regular basis since his stroke, and that's where she was when Butch, Bob and Ellis entered the room with their instruments — trombone, saxophone and tuba, respectively. It was to be the first post-stroke blowing session of the Loma Alta Brass Band.

Clete was laid out in the recliner. A bowling tournament played softly on the T.V. Ginger raised her head as the boys entered the room. Bob slipped over and turned the T.V. off, and Ellis huffed a few low notes on the tuba. Juanita opened the curtains to let the harsh, bright sunlight into the room.

Clete woke, rumpled and red-eyed, and brushed Ginger off his chest. Juanita walked across the room with Clete's clarinet cradled in her hands. She placed it in Clete's lap and stepped back and said, "The boys think it's time, Clete, and they won't say it, but I believe they got the feeling you been stonewalling 'em."

Clete rubbed his eyes and let the clarinet lie for a second, feeling the pleasant pressure of the heavy wood against the half erection he had waken with. His band-mates' women — Ellis' Ruth, Bob's Glenda, Butch's Evelyn — filed into the room from the hallway and settled in on the furniture. Clete looked from one face to another with one word — stonewalling — echoing around inside his head. He lifted his clarinet, felt its solid weight. He fingered the familiar keys and licked the dry reed. After a few random warm-up notes — high-pitched toots that sent Ginger slink-